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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that business language training be based on results of a "language audit," designed to identify the skill levels required to carry out specific tasks, propose training solutions, and monitor progress. A British organization has established a framework for assessing five levels of language skill in this context. These standards define skills and competence and may be used by institutions to offer courses meeting employers' needs, and by employers to evaluate staff skills, recruit, and develop job descriptions. Several tools may be used for language auditing, but in general the process requires the auditor's understanding of the company or individual's long-term strategy and its aims and objectives within constraints of time, availability, and finance. When languages are perceived as a source of profit or loss, the audit gains paramount importance for managers and decision-makers. The audit has four stages: (1) general overview of the organization seeking language training; (2) identification of personnel involved; (3) assessment of individuals by questionnaire, interview, or meeting, incorporating the standards; and (4) report to the organization, including a plan of action for training. Several different approaches to analysis of training needs are available. (MSE)

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Catherine Greensmith

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SETTING THE STANDARDS: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LANGUAGE AUDIT.

Five main questions constitute the raison d'être of a business language audit:

- 1. What is it ?
- 2. Who needs it ?
- 3. Why ?
- 4. How do you conduct one ?
- 5. What do you do next ?

In the European context, there is a growing realisation amongst educational institutions and companies alike of the need to be able to communicate in more than one language. Foreign languages play an increasingly important role in the development and indeed survival of businesses, not only in terms of commercial and trading ventures, imports and exports, but equally so at the level of technology transfer, research, mergers and take-overs. The whole community is trying to compensate for the lack of linguistic ability by recruiting language graduates or foreign staff in companies, or by training the population in speaking other languages than their mother tongue. They are however faced with the difficult problem of the evaluation of the training available, the requirements of individuals or companies, and finally the suitability of the trainers.

An audit can thus be seen as an investigation of corporate communication policy in an international environment.
The language audit is designed to identify what levels of skills are required to carry out a specific task, propose tailor-made training solutions and monitor the level of progress.
Finally, the language audit should seek to set the priorities for the acquisition and/or the revival of existing knowledge.

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The setting of standards by nationally recognised organisations such as the Languages Lead Body comprises a clear definition of skills and competence commonly understandable by language training providers and language users.

The Languages Lead Body is a working party which was established in 1990 with representatives from key employers, professional associations and experts in the languages field, with the remit to set new national standards for the use of languages at work. (1)
The Languages Lead Body is part of CILT (the Centre for Information on Language Training and Research), situated in Regent's Park, in London (England).
The LLB has established a framework for general language standards divided into five levels:

- Level 1: Deal with predictable day to day activities, (the lowest)

- Level 2: Deal with varied daily activities,

- Level 3:
  - Deal with key work tasks,
  - Enable others to understand foreign language versions of familiar information,

- Level 4:
  - Deal with complex work tasks,
  - Translate and Interpret at an informal level,

- Level 5:
  - Deal with highly specialised tasks,
  - Translate and Interpret at a formal level,

based on the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.
The language standards describe what people are expected to do; how to assess whether they are achieving it, and the typical circumstances in which their competences would be expected. They are not descriptions of specific activities or tasks, nor simply the knowledge or skills learned through training programmes. They are defined within the context of the main areas of use:
- exchange information and advice,
- establish and maintain relationships,
- produce foreign versions of information.

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(1) LLB News Bulletin, Issue 2, August 1992, Page 1.

The impact and benefits of the language standards have been clearly identified:

- The General Language Standards comprise definitions of skills and competence, - thus providing a common specification understandable by both linguists and employers.

- Training providers will be able to use them to offer more marketable courses that meet employers'needs.

- Employers will be able to evaluate the skills of their staff more accurately to match organisations'needs.

- Employers will find standards an aid to recruitment, appraisals and job descriptions.

- Standards will provide a logical framework for improvement of competence which is nationally recognised and transportable from one job to another.

- Existing qualifications are rationalised.

It also provides a framework within which the improvement of competence can be closely monitored.

Several tools may be used in the process of auditing, but primarily it consists of a partnership between the learner and the assessor. The auditor needs to understand the long-term strategy of the company or the individual, its aims and objectives within the constraints of time, availability and finance.
Budgets are no longer elastic; speed and flexibility are of the essence and resources must be managed efficiently. Today, the aim is to achieve the maximum level of quality available, for the lowest cost, within shorter and shorter deadlines.
When languages are perceived as a source of profit or loss for a company, the audit becomes of paramount importance for managers and decision-makers. It gives the institution seeking the training the opportunity to analyse its problems in a specific field, to control its processes, to change its activities and above all it allows major decisions to be made with the benefit of insight.
Similarly, the individual or the company must provide collaboration and access to the information already available. A knowledge of particular markets may prove useful, although the understanding of a suitable learning environment is more essential. Effective language management is the successful combination of five factors: men, means, materials, method and milieu.

A language audit is normally divided into four stages. The traditional and most commonly used method comprises:

- the compilation of a general overview of the organisation seeking the training,

- the identification of the personnel involved, in terms of hierarchy, promotion prospects and personal goals,

- the assessment of individuals by way of questionnaires, interviews or meetings, which should incorporate the use of standards,

- a report to the organisation, including a plan of action.

Questionnaires range from the simplest to the most elaborate. In the majority of cases, they are designed by the assessor according to the company's requirements. Sent before the individual interviews are due to take place, they fulfil a dual function: evaluate the experience in the language and identify the needs and usage of the language, in the past, at present, and in the future.

The purpose of the interview is to take up points from the questionnaire in a more informal way, to determine the motivation of the potential trainee, to elaborate the dynamics of the training and to clarify the reactions to training with the individual.

Although it is probably unavoidably arbitrary, the auditor needs to establish a scale of proficiency in the language. Most scales comprise six levels, 0 to 6, where level 2 corresponds to minimal comprehension, level 3 to speaking at moderate speed and level 4 to a limited application of the language as well as a good understanding.

The report is often perceived to be the most important element of the audit because it outlines suggestions for training and potential solutions to specific language shortfalls. In any case, a balanced report should offer both internal and external training, suggest group as well as one-to-one teaching and a combination of training at home and abroad. The transfer of knowledge can be on a self-access basis or teacher-led, and should include new technologies such as CALL software packages or interactive audio-visual material. The report also establishes a time scale, identifies returns and offers regular evaluations of progress. And last, but by no means least, it outlines the necessary budget.

More recently, audit reports have included the possibility of acquiring qualifications with advice on potential logistics problems, and assistance in creating open-learning and resource centres in larger organisations.

Elsewhere in Europe, in France for instance, colleagues are working on different models such as the PDCA (Plan, Do, Check and Act) strategy.(2) In this case, the audit is based on the definition of the results to be achieved, the resources to be utilized and the activities to be implemented.
The planning phase is used to "define the communication tools and channels the company and its personnel should use to communicate with each foreign partner." The second stage, DO, implements a "foreign language communications strategy". The effectiveness of this strategy is evaluated at regular intervals during the "checking" phase. The "action" stage corresponds to the implementation of the necessary changes in accordance with the results of the evaluation.
The PDCA strategy is based on a close collaboration between the assessor, who is responsible for the implementation of the PLAN and CHECK phases of this model in association to the language audit, and the company who agrees to support the DO stage.
When the partnership is successful, the final phase, the ACTION phase, illustrates the concerted efforts of all the parties involved in the delivery of an effective communicative linguistic package.

The PDCA method works best in the longer-term and in larger companies where feed-back and monitoring procedures are already in place at various levels within the system.

Another consultancy firm, attached to the French public sector and specialising in the provision of language training for the service industries (3), has based its auditing procedure of linguistic needs on the concept of three different but interlocking types of language:

- language for general use,
- language for operational use,
- language for professional use.

The training is thus focused on the linguistic area common to the three categories. In this case, the audit consists more in the diagnosis of a problem rather than in the suggestion of a plan of action. This concept results in an approach of the training from four different directions:

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(2) The PDCA strategy has been developed by PMR Consultants in Nancy (France).
(3) CITE Langues, under the aegis of the French Ministry of Education, Nancy, France.

- 1. Identification of a non-linguistic problem, generally highlighting operational difficulties within an organisation.

- 2. Language training will not provide the solution to a problem which has been identified as one of inadequate material and/or procedures to carry out a specific task. The need for professional language services in translation or interpreting will be perceived as being more appropriate.

- 3. The provision of a counselling service designed to find alternative answers to specific problems linked to linguistic weaknesses, including transnational collaboration and transfer of technology.

- 4. A more traditional package based on an audit report suggesting customized training solutions.

Such a training strategy is dependent on the complete integration of the acquisition of knowledge both linguistic and vocational, in order to allow efficiency, continuity and constant monitoring of performance, even if in a narrower field.

In spite of the cost and the hours involved, a language audit is a necessary investment into the future. It is a long-term venture in need of constant up-dating ahd revision, and should not be mistaken for a needs-based analysis, which is normally carried out on a smaller, shorter-term and more limited scale.
Language audits and needs-based analyses are essential in order to provide the most relevant and best adapted training. As it is expensive in terms of money, time and effort on the part of all concerned, an audit is deemed justifiable from fifteen people onwards, and if the company operates in a multi-lingual environment. For less than ten people, a detailed needs-analysis made on an individual basis is probably more applicable.

After an audit, many, if not many more questions will still require an answer, the need for professional services such as translation or interpreting, or the quantification of tangible commercial benefits for instance ....

A language audit is the diagnosis of a communication weakness; it may not be able to offer ready-made solutions and ideally should not be carried out by a training provider.

For a company which does not have a foreign language strategy, the audit will help in defining one. In a company where a foreign language policy is already in place, the audit will assist in evaluating its success.

Once the symptoms have been recognized, the illness must be identified and if possible cured !....

And as far as the upkeep of language skills is concerned, that would be a whole topic in itself !.....

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